

first and foremost

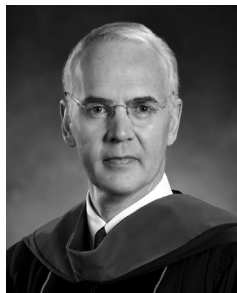
Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



SUNDAY WORSHIP:
8:30am and 11:00am (Sanctuary)
10:45am (Ignite Modern Worship)

FirstPresGreenville.org



"Great Expectations"

Luke 1:39-56

For most of us, last week was dominated

by putting the finishing touches on our Christmas trees, writing those last-minute cards, planning the final details for Christmas dinner, and buying that special gift for those we love. Christmas is a time for creating lasting memories with family and friends while enjoying all the fun and festivities of the season. Children get so excited, they are like a dog with two tails that cannot sit still. Being patient is not easy, especially at Christmas.

In Luke's opening chapters, where we first read of the Christmas story, Luke draws us into the unfolding redemptive purposes of God as we encounter Mary, who is both surprised and startled at the angel's words, *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God"* (Luke 1:35). I often wonder what went through Mary's mind during those first weeks after the angel's visit, and what dominated her thinking for the next nine months as she waited for the birth of Christ.

As the gospel story develops, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who fully realizes what is happening. Her response to Mary's visit is one of amazement and thanksgiving. Elizabeth's exuberant exclamation when she greets Mary highlights how these cousins delighted in the sheer wonder of God Himself.

In 1:46, Luke records Mary's response to Elizabeth. If I were teaching New Testament studies to seminary undergraduates, I might draw their attention to the parallel structure of the composition, its similarity to other ancient Semitic poetry, its form, and its metrical dynamic, content, and neatly arranged clauses.

Yet for most readers, what is striking is not the dry analysis of a deconstructed text,

but that both Mary and Elizabeth are lifting their hearts heavenward in an expression of overwhelming wonderment, love, and faith. The focus here is thanksgiving and adoration at who God is and all that He has done.

Has there been a point in this past year when you were stirred by the Spirit of God, so moved by a time of prayer or praise, so challenged by the Word of God, that your only response was one of worship and adoration? Your heart and soul were enlarged, your mind overwhelmed by the attributes and character of God, and your only legitimate response was to say with Mary, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my soul rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47).

On Christmas Eve a few years ago, I asked a dad who had three children under five and a family of six visiting for a few days, what was his plans for Christmas Day were. He replied, "Survival!" We sometimes find ourselves praying to just get through the holidays, yet when we do that we are in serious danger of missing the primary reason behind the Christmas festivities: the birth of Christ.

Mary could have prayed that she would simply survive all of the upheaval that God was bringing into her life, but in fact the opposite was the case. Her prayer was focused not on her own circumstances, but rather entirely on what God was doing in bringing to pass the redemption of humanity.

How often are our prayers consumed with our own wants, needs, and desires? Do we find that our prayers are almost devoid of worship and adoration when we focus on ourselves? Yet Mary's prayer is the opposite of such a prayer. It is in fact a model prayer, using language that reflects many of the major themes of the Bible. It is a prayer informed by and overflowing with a knowledge of the Scriptures, which in turn lifts the heart and soul soaring heavenwards. The focus of the prayer is on the faithfulness of God in the past, His covenant promises, and His provision and providence toward His people in times of need.

Mary is now living in a manner she could never have anticipated. Her life is being shaped, refined, and fashioned by the call of God and His enabling grace. She reveals her obedience, faithfulness, and immense courage in her opening words: *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."*

As we anticipate Christmas, I invite you to join us at First Presbyterian on Christmas Eve. Each service will focus on the birth of Christ, capturing Mary's wonderment and reminding us of the significance of Christmas as we sing,

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

I do trust that you and those you love will experience God's richest blessing this Christmas.

Christmas Eve at First Presbyterian Church

2:00pm

Afternoon
Service

5:00pm

Children's
Service

7:00pm

Candlelight
Service

11:00pm

Watchnight
Service

More information at FirstPresGreenville.org or 864.235.0496